

## He Got Things Done:

## A Profile on Richard A. McGee

Except to a handful of very longtime employees, Richard A. McGee is little more than the name attached to the California Department of Corrections' training academy in Galt, South of Sacramento.

The department dedicated the Richard A. McGee Correctional Training Center in 1983, seven months before McGee died at age 86. It was a fitting tribute,



*Mr. McGee served as CDC Director from 1944 to 1961.*

and not simply because McGee served as CDC's first director and later as California's first Youth and Adult Correctional Agency administrator, but McGee also helped lead California's prison system into the modern age entered the field of corrections not as an officer but as a teacher.

Mr. McGee was born on Sept. 11, 1897, in rural Minnesota, one of two sons and the fourth youngest in a family of nine children. He was the first child in his family to go to high school. But the family was not prosperous. To earn money for school expenses, McGee worked with his father as a carpenter. He finished high school in three years and by the age of 16, was an experienced journeyman carpenter when he began supporting himself entirely from his earnings.

McGee attended and graduated from a local teacher's college. For two years, he held several teaching and administrator jobs in small-town schools in Minnesota and South Dakota before enrolling in the University of Minnesota, where he studied architecture and eventually earned a bachelor's degree in education.

McGee moved to a federal prison in Pennsylvania to establish an education department. In 1934, Austin McCormick, the federal official who offered McGee the job in Washington State, was named New York City's commissioner of corrections by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. McCormick invited McGee to apply for the position of warden of the new city penitentiary being built on Riker's Island. The new prison stood three-quarters complete but without a roof: the building contractor had gone bankrupt before he could finish the

facility. A few inmates lived on the island in wooden barracks. Within two years, under McGee's direction, the facility was completed and inmates were moved from the old jail on Welfare Island.

In Washington, McGee implemented medical programs and feeding programs at each institution, including prison dairies and farms. He established job classifications and job descriptions for every employee, a way to address problems with political patronage that plagued the system. To solve wartime staffing shortages, he recruited conscientious objectors for prison jobs and persuaded the Legislature to increase the pay for prison employees.

Meanwhile, decades of mismanagement and corruption were about to catch up with California's antiquated prison system. In November 1943, a lifer and two-time escapee from Folsom State Prison named Lloyd Sampsell walked away from a wartime harvest camp near Davis and was arrested while visiting his girlfriend in San Francisco.

The arrest made headlines throughout the state and gave Gov. Earl Warren the excuse he was waiting for to reorganize a prison system that had been in place since the 1870s. In January 1944, acting on the recommendations of the specially appointed Governor's Investigative Committee on Penal Affairs, the California Legislature abolished the old system and replaced it with a newly created Department of Corrections. McGee was asked to apply for the job. The nationwide search for a director involved an eight-hour written examination, in which McGee ranked first out of eight candidates, followed several weeks later by a lengthy oral interview with a five-member panel that recommended McGee for the job. I told the governor that I felt like I was being examined for the governorship rather than for the director of a department," McGee said in a 1971 interview.

McGee reported for work on April 20, 1944, 10 days before CDC officially began operations on May 1. His first task was to deal with the issues uncovered by the investigative panel's inquiry into the old prison system. Eight prisons opened during McGee's tenure as director, giving him a chance to keep his hand in the construction side of the business. In 1961, McGee left his position as CDC director to become administrator of YACA. He retired from state government in 1971 to become president of the American Justice Institute.